

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Leader and Cabinet

13 April 2006

**AUTHOR:** Chief Executive

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### REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

#### Purpose

1. To report on the meeting held in Cambridge on 13 March 2006, arranged by the ODPM and attended by Leaders and Chief Executives from councils in the Eastern Region. The Leader and Chief Executive attended from this Council.

#### Background

2. A series of regional meetings were being held around the country in order to contribute to the white paper expected in the summer of 2006.

#### Considerations

3. The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Jim Fitzpatrick was present and emphasised that this was a listening exercise as far as the ODPM was concerned. No decisions had been made as to whether there would or would not be a reorganisation of local government and the Minister was keen to hear views on the subject from local government representatives.
4. Paul Rowsell from the ODPM gave a brief presentation highlighting that the debate was about how to secure the best:
  - a. Community Leadership,
  - b. Community Engagement
  - b. Value Services.

He emphasised that this was not a sterile unitary v two-tier debate but was rather looking at innovative governance options.

5. In considering the best future governance arrangements, key questions were:
  - a. How to provide strategic leadership at the local level – strong visible accountable leadership is essential if places are to develop a vision for the future and achieve.
  - b. How to ensure that there is genuine neighbourhood flexibility – whatever governance arrangements, people need to be empowered as individuals and as local communities.
  - c. How to ensure value for money – integrated and co-ordinated high quality public services – need to be delivered efficiently no matter who provides the service.
6. Some of the issues and questions Mr Rowsell touched upon included:
  - a. Links to the city regions agenda
  - b. The optimum size for a future local area

- c. Coterminosity with other delivery partners
  - d. Efficiency and value for money
  - e. Financial issues – can the transitional costs be managed within existing resources – on this point the intention was fairly clear that no additional funding would be made available
  - f. Empowerment and participation – how can market towns, parishes and neighbourhoods be represented and empowered? This was not so much in the sense of parish councils delivering services but having influence over the services.
7. The White Paper on the future of local government would come out mid-2006. At the same time, the Government would finalise its position on reorganisation. If the debate provided a ‘yes’, proposals would be invited from local government for restructuring. Where proposals were agreed, they would be implemented by primary legislation.
8. After setting the debate in the context of the White paper being on the question of function and form and the Lyons Review coming forward with how to finance the functions and form, the subject was opened up for discussion. Specific questions posed were:
- a. What is the debate in your area?
  - b. What are your ideas for future governance?
  - c. Is change worthwhile?
  - d. If so, how best to do it?
9. A large number of participants, covering all counties in the Eastern Region, gave views and comments in the discussion that followed. Comments included
- a. Pleased to be engaged in the debate – at last.
  - b. Reminder that there are 3 tiers of local government in many areas, county, district and parish, rather than 2 tiers.
  - c. Some cities expressed strong support for unitary local government.
  - d. On the question of what the people thought, the minister made it clear that the councils could decide how to engage their communities in the debate.
  - e. On the question of boundary changes, the Minister’s view was that boundaries should not be interfered with, but rather existing districts could be used as building blocks. This was countered by a view that there were a number of anomalous boundaries that should be addressed if a reorganisation was to make any sense.
  - f. The ODPM felt that there was benefit from coterminosity with partner agencies. It was pointed out that just as coterminosity with some partners had eventually been achieved, PCT boundaries were now being changed again.
  - g. On a specific question from Cllr Kindersley seeking assurance that any new arrangements would be properly funded, the Minister responded with the intention that any improved arrangements that emerged would be self-financing.
  - h. There was a strong view, from most counties and some districts, that reorganisation would be a major distraction for little benefit. The funding and the efforts would be more usefully directed to making the present arrangements work better.
10. ODPM had referred to there being an “opt in” approach where councils will be invited to submit proposals for their areas. Whilst it would be the choice of the local authorities whether or not to opt in, there was the question as to what would happen if some councils in an area wanted to opt in and others did not. On the issue of possible

timing for implementing any change, the ODPM response was that there is no certainty. The earliest any legislation could be brought forward would be end 2006/ early 2007. This could result in elections to shadow authorities in May 2008 and new authorities from April 2009.

11. In conclusion, the Minister reminded everyone of the 3 criteria for a solution i.e. strategic leadership, community engagement and value for money. The Chairman then summed up that the consensus appeared to be around improvement of the present 2/3 tier system, that boundaries and coterminosity were issues and that Local Area Agreements/ Strategic Partnerships offered a way forward.

### **Conclusions/Summary**

12. Until the white paper appears in the summer and the governments thinking is known, there is little basis for carrying out any effective local work on the topic.

### **Recommendations**

13. Cabinet is asked to note the report.

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: None

**Contact Officer:** John Ballantyne – Chief Executive  
Telephone: (01954) 713011